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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how students' independent reading of good books--one example is "The Phantom Tollbooth"--leads to improved reading performance. The paper also touches on the important factors that are impacting independent reading: priority and time. A literature review in the paper found, among other things, that the best predictor of reading achievement is the amount of time students spend reading on their own but, that many students do not read on their own as frequently as they should. The paper points out that independent reading accounts for 1/3 or more of vocabulary growth, provides students with a wide range of background knowledge, enhances reading comprehension, and promotes reading as a lifelong activity. It advocates the practice of sustained silent reading (SSR) with an emphasis on student choice as a method for students to acquire reading skills. The paper concludes that educators must promote positive reading attitudes through enjoyable teaching experiences, and that an extensive classroom library and incorporating good books into reading programs will motivate students to read. (NKA)

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The Phantom Tollbooth and How the Independent Reading of Good Books Improves Student's Reading Performance

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Introduction

"There was once a boy named Milo who didn't know what to do with himself—not just sometimes, but always.

When he was in school he longed to be out, and when he was out he longed to be in. On the way he thought about coming home, and coming home he thought about going. Wherever he was he wished he were somewhere else, and when he got there he wondered why he'd bothered. Nothing really interested him—least of all the things that should have" (Juster 1961).

Like Milo, many students are uninspired and unmotivated when it comes to reading independently. For example, a fellow colleague named Curtis, recapped his disinterest in reading in his primary grades. He found most books that the teacher provided to be exceedingly dull and simple. Although his reading skills were consistent with his teacher's 5th grade reading standards, he never truly felt the desire to read independently.

Recognizing his lack of enthusiasm, his mother introduced him a book entitled The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster. He immediately identified with the main character, an uninspired boy named Milo. At first glance, the story was a captivating tale about an alternative world, a la Alice in Wonderland. Upon closer examination, he discovered the world to be rich with literary figures of speech such as metaphors, clichés, puns, and synonyms. Although some of these were new concepts to Curtis, he instantly became intrigued with the idea that words can have more than one meaning. While his interest grew deeper in the content of the book, his practice of using these figures of speech increased dramatically. As a result, he developed a greater desire to read on his own and began to discover books independently. This newfound interest had such an impact on Curtis that he later became an English major and is fascinated with the English language to this day.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this paper is to examine how students' independent reading of good books--in this case The Phantom Tollbooth--leads to improved reading performance. This paper will also touch on the important factors that are impacting independent reading: priority and time.

Literature Review

Anderson, Wilson and Fielding (1988) conducted an extensive study of independent reading. They examined a wide array of activities and their relationship to reading achievement and growth in reading. They found that the best predictor of reading achievement was determined by the amount of time students spend reading on their own. (Collaborative 1997)

Research has shown that independent reading accounts for 1/3 or more of vocabulary growth, provides students with a wide range of background knowledge, enhances reading comprehension, and promotes reading as a life long activity. (Colabello-Breitbeck 1998) Templeton and Pikulski (1999) found that when students partake in a wide variety of independent reading, they come into contact with vocabulary that rarely occurs in the spoken language. Some examples of this rarely spoken vocabulary are words like *phenomenon, anxiety and stabilize*.

Moser and Morrison (1998) state that students who have confidence that they are capable and proficient readers are more likely to perform better than those who do not hold such beliefs. Additionally, students who consider reading to be important and

interesting and who have personally relevant reasons for reading will actively engage in the reading process in a more constant and inspired manner. Smith, Tracy and Weber (1998) indicated that reading skills must be strengthened in order for children to subscribe and commit to a lifelong practice of recreational reading. Without this practice, their performance in *other* subjects will likely suffer. It has been shown that increased independent reading has a direct correlation to improvement in math skills.

> *"'It seems to me that almost everything is a waste of time,' he remarked one day as he walked dejectedly home from school. 'I can't see the point in learning to solve useless problems, or subtracting turnips from turnips, or knowing where Ethiopia is or how to spell February.' And since no one bothered to explain otherwise, he regarded the process of seeking knowledge as the greatest waste of time of all."* (Juster 1961).

Unfortunately, studies show that many students do not read on their own as frequently as they should. Moser and Morrison (1998) found that aliteracy, or the ability to read but lacking the motivation, is an enormous concern in the United States that gains momentum as negative attitudes toward reading continues to be assessed. In a nationwide study of America's fifth graders, only 50% read books for an average of four minutes per day or less, 30% read for as little as two minutes a day or less, and a startling 10% never reported reading any book on any particular day. For the vast majority of the children, reading from books occupied less than 1% of their time.

Smith, Tracy and Weber (1998) reported that overall, elementary children spend about 2.3 hours per day watching television, while devoting only eight minutes per day to leisure reading. Children are being attracted regularly to video games, television and the Internet and by extracurricular activities in an environment that essentially fails to promote independent reading. Due to the demands of today's society, parents lack the

appropriate time and energy to be involved and encouraging in their child's practice of reading. All too often, there is a shortage of reading material found in the homes of elementary students and an overall lack of a supportive reading environment. For these reasons, many children are denied the necessary skills to enjoy reading as a recreational pastime. In addition, students that show reading deficits tend to avoid reading as much as possible.

The uphill challenge of motivating students to read independently has generated concern at the national level. President Clinton called for national action to ensure that children receive the necessary skills to become independent readers by the third grade. Many solution strategies have been implemented to help promote an interest in reading. Hopkins (1997) reported that sustained silent reading (SSR), with an emphasis on student choice, serves as a time for children to discover and decipher new words. SSR builds students' confidence tackling trouble spots in books and allows them to use their word attack skills to figure out new vocabulary. Parents report that the amount of time that their children spend reading independently outside of school is directly increased by the practice of SSR. Smith, Tracy and Weber (1998) proposed that adult modeling at home and in school is also very crucial in motivating students to read on their own.

Summary

Studies show that the best predictor of reading achievement is determined by the amount of time students spend reading on their own. Independent reading accounts for 1/3 or more of vocabulary growth, provides students with a wide range of background knowledge, enhances reading comprehension, and promotes reading as a life long

activity. Increased independent reading has a direct correlation to improvement in other subject areas. Unfortunately, many children are denied the necessary skills and lack the pertinent habits that promotes reading as a recreational pastime. A solution to this is the practice of sustained silent reading (SSR), with an emphasis on student choice. SSR serves as a time for children to discover and decipher new words as well as build their confidence to read on their own. Adult modeling and participation at home and in school are also important in inspiring students to read independently.

Implications

With the aforementioned findings in mind, certain constructive strategies can and should be implemented to insure that students are developing a desire to read independently. According to Smith, Tracy and Weber (1998), the young child's most powerful model is the parent. When children see parents reading for enjoyment and when parents frequently read to them, those children are instilled with a desire to read. As parents, we will provide our children with time, encouragement, and a variety of at-home reading materials.

As educators, we will promote positive reading attitudes through enjoyable reading experiences. We will provide an extensive classroom library and respect each student's freedom of choice. We hope to foster independence and self-esteem in each child so that they may be encouraged to be lifelong readers. We will take time to read aloud to students daily, model personal reading enjoyment and integrate formal and informal book sharing. We will dedicate sufficient time in each day—either in the form of SSR or otherwise—to allow the students to be meaningfully engaged in the reading

process. We will establish motivational strategies that will serve as incentives to each student's reading development. One method of motivating students will be to suggest and incorporate good books such as The Phantom Tollbooth into our reading program. Literary-rich books such as this one can provide a plethora of activities that will motivate the children's desire to read. Such activities for The Phantom Tollbooth include: interactive websites where the children are able to choose their own outcome, plays and skits that children can perform, vocabulary activities that are contextually based, debates on the importance of letters and words vs. the importance of numbers and equations, and various art projects. We would suggest that both parents and teachers alike always remember to stress the importance of independent reading and make provisions to encourage a positive reading environment using the suggestions above. Hopefully, this will continue to remain a national priority in schools and at home, with further monitoring and research by those applicable parties. If all of these positive strategies are utilized, perhaps our outcome will be much like Milo's:

> *"And, in the very room in which he sat, there were books that could take you anywhere, and things to invent, and make, and build, and break, and all the puzzle and excitement of everything he didn't know—music to play, songs to sing, and worlds to imagine and then someday make real. His thoughts darted eagerly about as everything looked new—and worth trying"* (Juster 1961).

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